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ABSTRACT

The study examined the self-concept of rural elementary children to ascertain if differences occur according to sex. The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was used to determine cluster scores on: behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. Administered orally by regular classroom teachers because some students read below fifth grade level, the scale was administered to fifth and sixth grade students in three elementary schools in a rural county in Georgia. Minority children comprised 14% of the population, with the 5th grade class containing 76 males and 72 females and the 6th grade class containing 49 males and 72 females. Results indicated that females had significantly lower self-concepts than males at both fifth and sixth grade levels. Girls also had significantly lower cluster scores on physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. Differences appeared to have practical as well as statistical significance. No significant differences by sex were found on behavior and on intellectual and school status cluster scores. Absence of a significant difference on the latter may have reflected the ambiguity of the importance of intellectual status as a separate component of self-concept in either sex in this rural setting. (AH)

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Self Concept and Sex of Rural Children

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The objective of this study is to determine whether self-concept of rural elementary children varies by sex. Rural women share today's feminine expectations of independence, autonomy, and equity with others (Clarenbach, 1977). Rural female children have grown up exposed to the rising tide of expectations of women. They have learned about this concept of equality despite growing up in a rural culture, but they also have learned concurrently about the countervailing expectations of subservience to males in the roles of wife and mother that characterize the rural culture (Amodeo, Edelson, & Martin, 1982).

A favorable self-concept typically measured on self-report scales requires positive responses to items that indicate being satisfied with oneself. Self-satisfaction is difficult to attain if the way one desirably should be is ill-defined, ambiguous, or disagreed upon among others important to the individual. It therefore was hypothesized that rural female children today differ significantly from male peers in desirable qualities of self-concept.

Literature Review

Self-concept is a vaguely defined theoretical construct (Harter, 1982), but is ordinarily measured as a global rating of the way one sees oneself. This totality of self-knowledge is presumed to be critical to one's behavior. Ideally, self-concept should not be a direct consequence of any single variable such as sex. A variety of empirically selected items comprise self-concept scales, and items are selected to exclude the effects of variables considered to be extraneous to the construct of self-concept.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1969) as standardized was designed to exclude sex as a variable that differentiated results. Studies reporting its development (Piers & Harris, 1964) and subsequent construct validation (Franklin, Duley, Rousseau, & Sabers, 1981) also did not find total scale differences by sex. Recent studies have omitted sex as a variable discussed in self-concept research (Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978) or found it not a plausible explanation of results (Smith, Zingale, & Coleman, 1978). Two self-concept studies that included specifically rural subjects (Larned & Muller, 1979; Velasco-Barraza & Muller, 1982) omitted sex as a variable reported.

It therefore was presumed that differences by sex that might be found among contemporary rural children on a scale designed to exclude sex as a differentiating variable would depict true differences that are a consequence of life experiences amid an ambiguous rural culture.

Methodology

The self-concept instrument utilized was the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1969). A total scale score and six cluster scores, each said to be a component of self-concept, were obtained. Components are 1)Behavior, 2) Intellectual and School Status, 3) Physical Appearance and Attributes, 4) Anxiety, 5) Popularity, and 6) Happiness and Satisfaction. Norms for the total scale are unisex. Anxiety is the only cluster in which sex differences occurred among the subjects used in standardization of the scale. Boys more often denied feeling nervous or worried. Kuder-Richardson Formula 21 homogeneity coefficients

ranging from .78 to .93 were reported for the norm group. Comparative reviews of the scale are available (Robinson & Shaver, 1973; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Smith, et al., 1978; & Wylie, 1974).

The scale was administered orally by regular classroom teachers since some students read below fifth grade level, a procedure recommended in the scale manual. Teachers also administered tests of academic ability, and provided information about reading group placement as well as parental occupation and education from school records to enable estimates of SES. Results reported here can be attributed to the influence of sex rather than to other variables for which data were obtained.

Platten and Williams (1979; 1981) reported instability in factors on the Piers-Harris and recommended that researchers factor analyze their own data. Data obtained in this study were factor analyzed (Berryman, Larkins, and Berryman, 1982). Factor structures differed somewhat from those reported in the test manual, but tended to support hypotheses about differences in importance of intellectual activities among rural and urban children. Significant differences found in the present study did not appear to be consequences of factor instability.

For this study, analyses of variance for the total scale score and each of the six cluster scores were conducted by sex for each grade level and for the total sample.

Subjects

Subjects were the fifth and sixth grade students in three elementary schools in a rural county in northern Georgia. In fifth grade were 76 males and 72 females; in sixth grade were 49 males and 72 females. Schools were selected to be representative of the system as a whole in a range of variables including ability and achievement of students and socio-economic status and race of parents. The county and the school system have no visible characteristics distinguishing them from others in the area in ways that might be expected to influence results. Minority group students comprised 14% of the population, approximately the national average. In child rearing practices, general conservatism, and extent of religiosity, the county population also approximated "typical" traits commonly attributed to rural areas of the United States.

Results

Females had significantly lower self-concepts than males at both fifth and sixth grade levels. Girls also had significantly lower cluster scores on Physical Appearance and Attributes, Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. (see Table 1). Differences appeared to have practical as well as statistical significance. No significant differences by sex were found on Behavior and on Intellectual and School Status cluster scores. Absence of a significant difference on the latter may have reflected the ambiguity of the importance of intellectual status as a separate component of self-concept in either sex in this rural setting. On the total scale and four of the six components clusters, girls differed significantly in ways that suggest that the conditions of their daily life inhibit development of a desirable self-concept.

Implications

It seems possible or even probable that self-concept of female children is

an emerging problem for rural areas and rural schools. There was no reason to believe that the particular schools included in this study differed from other rural schools in ways that influenced results. Neither was there reason to believe that child rearing patterns in the county were unique.

Self-concept often has been linked to academic success and social adjustment and aptitudes (Combs and Snygg, 1959; Rogers, 1951; Sears and Sherman, 1964). At current rates both locally and nationally half or more of the girls in this study can expect to be divorced. Many may lack the self-concept necessary to maximize their potential for success or even to function effectively on their own. At the very time that good self-concept in females may be most critical, it was lower than reported norms among these rural girls in elementary school.

Replications of this study in other rural areas are needed for verification of results reported here. Meanwhile, rural educators should be alert to the potential problems, academic and social, presented by low self-concepts among their female students.

Table 1

Mean Self-Concept Scores by Sex for Total Sample, Grades Five and Six Combined

	Males n = 125		Females n = 144			
Piers-Harris Scales	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
Composite	56.71	12.15	50.86	12.53	15.01	.0001
Behavior	10.10	3.19	10.77	3.21	2.98	.09
Intellectual and School Status	11.03	3.78	10.51	4.09	1.18	.28
Physical Appearance and Attributes	8.45	3.55	6.10	3.40	30.53	.0000
Anxiety	9.90	2.50	7.85	3.18	33.80	.0000
Popularity	8.58	2.47	7.18	2.83	18.33	.0000
Happiness and Satisfaction	8.40	1.87	7.31	2.24	18.39	.0000

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